



spark

the workshop

Anna Degotardi gets thrown in the deep end.

The first thing I did when I found out I'd won a place at SPARK was cheer, gloat and tear up all the little rejection letters I'd been stockpiling over the past few months. Finally success!

Then I got an email with a list of the other, rather more accomplished, participants. Name 1: Mine. That's good, they must like me, great start. Name 2: Tony Ayres. Oh God, *Walking on Water*, documentaries galore, a real feature director. Name 3: Clara Law.

Reality, curse of

I have successfully missed every one of acclaimed art house filmmaker Clara Law's films at every film festival I've ever been to.

I did a little Internet search and the first thing that came up was an interview Clara had done after her film *The Goddess of 1967* was released. In it were references to her dislike of traditional narrative, three-act structure and entertainment in general.

I stopped there, fighting hyperventilation. My film was a romantic comedy, with three acts – a traditional narrative that I really wanted to be entertainment or entertaining or both, or did Clara mean it should be neither? The new kid on the block wasn't sure. And I listened to NKOTB as a teenager and was in love with Donny Wahlberg, and I bet Clara's never even heard of such a trashy band or boy group or whatever they were. And I love *Pretty Woman*.

Okay, so I did hyperventilate. But panic passes, and I read over my script and decided it did have a lot of promise and that I'm not as one-dimensional as a teenage boy band-loving Julia Roberts fan sounds. We've all been there. So I bought the DVD last month – who's looking?

On to Hepburn Springs and the realm of heavenly saviours.

The prospect of seven days in the idyllic surrounds of Victoria's spa country, of chirping birds and lavender scones, soon melted away the worry, the effect of the magical word combination 'buffet' and 'breakfast' working its wonders on this troubled soul.

It would be a scene from those Tuscan villa film nights at the travel agents, with massages and steaming coffee and occasional friendly, intellectual banter – all in soft focus! Clara would hate it.

We floated out of the bus, buoyed by friendly, not so intellectual gossip to discover two things. One, International Roast was the coffee de rigeur. And two, there was an information pack on the seven teams and advisers that SPARK had organised for us. Disaster.

Now, when SPARK's director, Mariel Beros, asked me for my bio, I sent in a little paragraph. Short and sweet. I've only been out of uni a year. Surely that's all everyone else would do?

Oh no. We're talking pages, veritable lists of great films and fabulous collaborators. My producer, Mark Newman, is from South Africa, I met him at university, I wrote the script (my second feature) and he said he'd produce it. End of story really. Thank God Mark's bio fitted into the pages-long category because mine was pitiful. Come pre-dinner drinks, I was a wreck.

Then it happened. Wine.

Suddenly and miraculously everyone was best friends, nerves were forgotten, and by main course not only the people but the tables themselves had nicknames, and Clara and I were soulmates.

A scene from dinner

Teeth stained, tongue loosened, Anna turns to new friend, American adviser Geoff Stier (nickname, 'The Quiet American').

The Quiet American: 'What do you think of our actors, like Matt Damon?'

Anna (no nickname): 'Matt Damon? He is the worst actor known to man. Take that movie *Mr Ripley*. That was actually a good movie, (haughty laughter from a corner), no I quite liked it. But Matt Damon?? Whoever was responsible for casting that...'



L-R: (front row) Writer/director Clara Law, writer/creativity coach Helen Carmichael, writer Lyn Chick, writer/director Mike Jenkins and Anna Degotardi. (background) US producer Geoff Stier, writer Christine Rogers, Carole Sklan (Director of Film Development, AFC), and SPARK program director Mariel Beros at the inaugural SPARK script workshop held in Hepburn Springs, Victoria, March 2003. SPARK is a joint initiative of the AFC & AFTRS.

'Rub seven scripts, their writers and seven advisers together for seven days and watch for sparks!' an adviser's perspective

As one of the advisers commissioned by SPARK to work with the writers I was intrigued to see how such an intensive process would work. Would the sheer weight of feedback from seven different advisers overwhelm the writers? Would they get such divergent opinions that they would go away more confused than assisted? Would the projects ultimately benefit from such a process? Would I get enough spare time to enjoy a lavender head massage in Hepburn Springs, spa capital of Victoria? Would the group of advisers be remembered as The Seven Deadly Sins, The Magnificent Seven or the Seven Dwarfs?

The advisers received the seven scripts some weeks before the get together and I for one was even more intrigued when it was obvious we had seven distinct genres on our hands.

The seven advisers brought a plethora of experience from writing, directing, script editing, mentoring, producing and distribution. Our job was to move the projects forward. To give one-on-one feedback on the current draft to the writer(s), and explore where they may go in the next draft.

Every morning, hung-over or not, the advisers would meet for a two-hour working breakfast. Each project was discussed in depth. Advisers would report on their previous day's sessions with the writer(s), how the conversation had gone, and what future direction the writer(s) may take the project. The quality of script analysis and the rigour applied was outstanding. Every one had an opinion and often they varied. Of course so much of art is about taste, one person's caviar is another's boiled potato. The discussions were passionate and certainly enlightening for yours truly.

On the third day advisers discussed the project with the writers and the producers attached to the scripts. This was

so the producers could get a sense of what the feedback had been and what the writer was currently thinking about the future draft. Then each adviser had a session with the writer(s) they had not worked with in the previous sessions. These meetings tended to focus on the future draft. By this time the writers had a pretty firm handle on what the reaction to their work had been and were already thinking about how the next draft could be improved.

Of course as is the rule in residential workshops much of the useful work was being done over the Sherry trifle, on the verandah or around the pool table. It's in these more informal settings, fuelled with a few ales, that people let their inhibitions relax and let their hearts speak rather than their minds. Suffice it to say neither the writers, producers or advisers could play pool to save their lives, and the games set new records for time taken to get all those coloured balls in the impossibly small pockets.

By the last day the camaraderie between staff, writers and advisers was evident. The writers were still relatively sane, no adviser had been found dead in the garden with a ballpoint through their heart, and we had broken the world record for the slowest game of pool ever played.

Was SPARK a success? Of course the proof of the pudding is still to be found in the eating, and we won't know that till we read the next draft. All I know is I'd love to have one of my scripts put through such a process. The chance to receive such thoughtful and rigorous criticism from seven experienced practitioners is indeed rare, and I would highly recommend it to any screenwriter or producer.

No, I didn't get my lavender head massage. But I did have the knots in my critical faculties well and truly worked over.

Mac Gudgeon is a former President of the AWG.

'Writers have the worst conditions, they're badly paid, and everyone takes advantage of them. I don't know why you do it'

The Not So Quiet American: 'I produced that film.'

Village Idiot: 'Oh.'

So Geoff really was a Hollywood producer. Who knew? At least Clara liked me.

The psych test

Well morning dawned and I woke to International Roast, a thumping headache and raucous, uncontrollable cackling from a side room. In addition to a gruelling program of one-on-one sessions with writers like the UK's Jimmy McGovern, our own Mac Gudgeon, and Hollywood producer Geoff Stier, we discovered we would also be undergoing a mysterious 'Session with Helen'.

A witch doctor was in the building, apparently inducing unbridled hilarity/madness in fellow writer and guinea pig, Lyn Chick. I looked at my program and gulped. I was up next.

Helen Carmichael. Writer, dancer, lecturer, dress designer and cook turned lifecoach and counsellor. She looked so sweet the night before, but what was she doing with poor Lyn?

Probably inspiring her like she did me.

Helen works with a technique called 'Play of Life' where you basically manipulate miniature figures and stages to represent a problem and a solution to that problem, whether it be about your script, a character, a fellow team member, or, as in my case, career direction. It's a secret what it means that I, an attention-hating lesbian, came out as a little bride doll with a white veil and a crowd of adoring onlookers. Suffice to say, Helen and her witch doctor sessions were the hit of the workshop, helping everyone along creatively and personally – if you ever have writer's block, Helen's your guru.

It's all about the story...

Alongside the doll play, writers were treated to individual two and a half-hour script sessions, morning and afternoon, with each of the advisers. Producers and directors joined their writers for two of the six days, allowing them to participate in the all-important script development phase.

You could say my sessions went in a slightly different direction than I expected. I went into SPARK with a narration-led 'quirky Australian comedy' about the overlooked son of a sixties pop star and came out three drafts down the track with what I like to term as an edgy comedy (no inverted commas). It's still about an overlooked son, but instead of voice over and kitsch we have lies, confusion and mistaken identity slugged with a heavy dose of Shakespearean chaos and carnival madness, all set to a Johnny Cash-inspired alt country lament.

SPARK bears fruit

Surprisingly not all the advisers were taken with the idea as the story evolved day after day, growing bigger and more complex with ever throat-tickling telling.

Towards the end of the week, when my larynx had finally given out and our massive script changes began to worry the advisers, Jimmy

McGovern, the most experienced of the Experienced, turned to me, his thick Liverpool accent smothering his words. 'Anna, I really like the idea. But I've got to tell you, I wouldn't attempt it.'

For me, the biggest testament for SPARK is that, if Jimmy had said that at the start of the week, I probably wouldn't have had the confidence to give the re-write a go.

I came out exhausted and fulfilled, armed with a plethora of generous ideas and suggestions from people with (gasp) no hidden agenda, a bunch of new film buddies, and most importantly, enormous enthusiasm and dedication to the script that has now taken over my life. I'm now going to guitar lessons, hanging out in dodgy suburban Oz-style honky tonk bars, and frequenting toe tappin' festivals in places like 'Hopetoun' and 'Yackandandah' to learn the subtleties of country life and music. Friends and family are a-lovin' this one.

Writers' encouragement or otherwise

During the workshop motivational encounters were varied, ranging from stories of one writer walking barefoot down a famous director's private beach, toes wriggling excitedly in the sand over plans for their next lucrative adaptation, to a slightly less heartening scene at breakfast: 8am, Day 4. A producer offhandedly muses to me, sipping his Earl Grey, 'Writers have the worst conditions, they're badly paid, and everyone takes advantage of them. I don't know why you do it.'

We do it because we love it. And innovative schemes like SPARK allow us to keep doing it. SPARK gave all the participants more feedback than most writers can hope for in a good year, and I'm sure the next drafts will reflect that. It was an amazing group of people, a truly inspiring experience and a real kick-start to my career with the people I met and managed to get drunk and photograph dancing, I mean impress.

On leaving, the last thing our resident comedian, hand on my shoulder, whimsically said to me was, 'You're living the dream – you're young, on a government grant, in St Kilda.'

By God he's right. We have a beach here. Sure, it's overrun with tourists, you have to watch for sharps, the water's freezing and the sand's kind of dirty. But if you get up really early in winter before the prostitutes and junkies come out to play, it'll be you, your pen and paper, and a couple of old Russians doing laps out to sea. Dare you to bare your toes, but...Here's to living the dream.

For actual information and other, lesser tales go to www.aftrs.edu.au/SPARK. SPARK is a new national script development program initiated by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) to broaden the quality, range and ambition of Australian feature projects and build the creative skills of talented film practitioners. Writer, producer and director teams were invited to submit feature film projects. Eight creative teams were selected.

Anna Degotardi graduated from film school at the Queensland University of Technology last year and has set up shop in Melbourne where she works as a writer and director. Anna is putting the finishing touches on her two latest short films, *The Dream Life of Meredith Banks* and *Se-se-seduce Me Tonight*, following her graduation short *enigma* and the bollywood high five. Her SPARK script, *Late to Rise*, is one of three features she is currently developing along with a short-feature and numerous short films. She now loves country music and large hats.